

# Trusting God in Adversity



# Introduction

In our last lecture, we addressed the question, “*Does anything fall outside God’s will and concern?*” Our search was intended to help us – especially when we are experiencing adversity and suffering – understand and embrace what the Bible says about the *extent* of God’s providence. In the process, we learned that “Scripture teaches God’s efficacious, universal control over the world.” John Frame further reflected on this theme by adding that “not even the smallest motion of the smallest object can occur without his government, preservation, and concurrence.” “But,” someone protests, “do you believe that God controls *everything*”? “Don’t you mean that God *permits* some things and *causes* others?” It’s a popular question longing for an answer.

# Reviewing a Profound Truth about God



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“This world does not just drift along on its own, but is the place where a great person lives and acts.”



# God's Agency

- **Natural evil is a curse.** The fall is the result of Adam and Eve's sin against God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:14-19). "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of child-birth together until now" (Rom. 8:22).
- **God hardens hearts.** "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord'" (Ex. 10:1-2).



# Some Verbs People Use for God's Agency

- Authors
- Brings about
- Causes
- Controls
- Creates
- Decrees
- Foreordains
- Incites
- Includes within his plan
- Makes happen
- Ordains
- Permits
- Plans
- Predestines
- Predetermines
- Produces
- Stands behind
- Wills



# Effectual Permission or Efficient Causation?

“Some Reformed thinkers have held the privation theory although rejecting libertarian freedom: God is the efficient cause of everything good, but only the ‘effectually permissive cause of evil.’ He ‘merely permits’ evil, because it ‘has not true being at all.’ But **I confess that I don’t know the difference between effectual permission and efficient causation**, and I don’t know why God should be responsible for what he causes efficiently, but not for what he permits effectually (Frame).”



# Understanding *Effectual* & *Efficient*

- **Effectual**, *adj.*, “that produces its intended effect, or adequately answers its purpose” (OED). ***Efficacious Permission***.
- “To say that the power of God’s providence is **efficacious** is simply to say that it always accomplishes its purpose” (Frame).
- **Efficient**, *adj.*, “making, causing to be; that makes (a thing) to be what it is; chiefly in connection with *cause*” (OED). ***Efficient Causation***.
- “Efficient cause is “the cause that makes the effect take place” (Frame).
- Is God the efficient cause of everything good, but only the effectually permissive cause of evil? (God *causes* vs. God *permits*)

# Effectual Calling

- **Q 67.** What is effectual calling?
- **A.** Effectual calling is the work of God's almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.

- *The Westminster Larger Catechism*



# John Frame's Illustration



“Consider Mike, who made Billy put graffiti on the school door. Billy of course, made the marks, but Mike caused him to do it. And so, most of us would agree, Mike deserves the blame. So it seems that if God causes sin and evil, he must be to blame for it.”



# God Causes Evil and Sin?

“The question arises whether God can be the efficient cause of sin, without being to blame for it....But if, as I recommend, we reject the privation theory, and if, as I believe, the connection between cause and blame in modern language is no stronger than the connection between ordination and blame, then it seems to me that it is not wrong to say that God causes evil and sin. Certainly we should employ such language cautiously, however, in view of the long history of its rejection in the tradition” (John Frame).



## Romans 9:14-16,18

- “What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy....So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”
- “Therefore, if we cannot assign any reason for his bestowing mercy on his people, but just that it so pleases him, neither can we have any reason for his reprobating others but his will. When God is said to visit mercy or harden whom he will, men are reminded that they are not to seek for any cause beyond his will” (John Calvin).

# A Secret Beyond Man's Knowing



**John Calvin**  
1509-1564

“But how it was ordained by the foreknowledge and decree of God what man’s future was without God being implicated as associate in the fault as the author and approver of transgression, is clearly a secret so much excelling the insight of the human mind, that I am not ashamed to confess ignorance.”



# Permission or Ordination?

“It is right to use *permission* to apply to God’s ordination of sin. But we should not assume, as Arminians do, that divine permission is anything less than sovereign ordination. What God permits or allows to happen will happen. God could easily have prevented Satan’s attack on Job if he had intended to. That he did not prevent that attack implies that he intended it to happen. Permission, then, is a form of ordination, a form of causation. That it is sometimes taken otherwise is a good argument against using the term, but perhaps not a decisive argument....The difference between the terms brings nothing to light that will solve the problem.”

- John Frame

# Adequate Terms



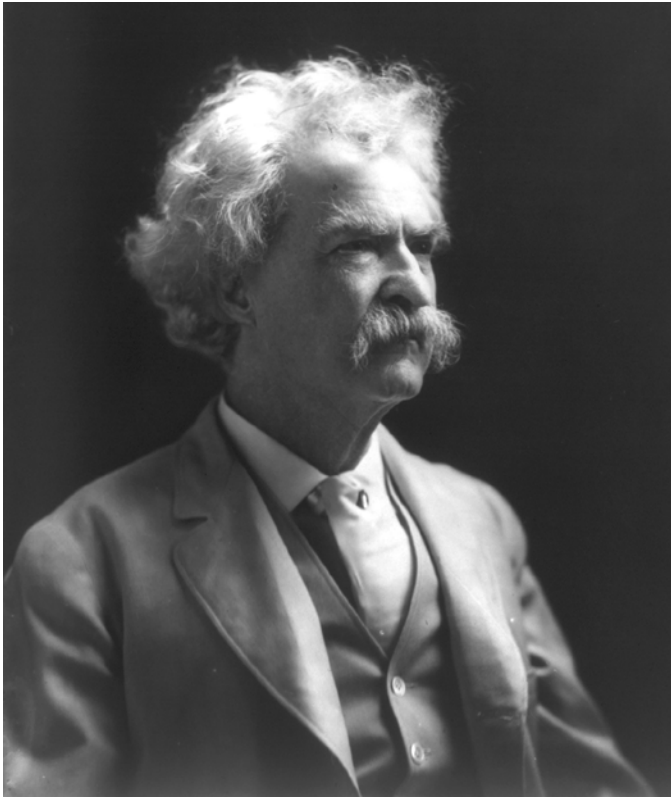
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“It is not easy to find adequate terms to describe God’s ordination of evil. Our language must not compromise either God’s full sovereignty or his holiness and goodness.”



# The Almost Right Word



**Mark Twain**  
1835-1910

“The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter - 'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.”

# Dr. Wayne Grudem's Illustration

“The analogy of an author writing a play may help us to grasp how both aspects can be true. In the Shakespearean play *Macbeth*, the character Macbeth murders King Duncan. Now (if we assume for a moment that this is a fictional account), the question may be asked, ‘Who killed King Duncan?’ On one level, the correct answer is ‘Macbeth.’ Within the context of the play he carried out the murder and is rightly to blame for it. But on another level, a correct answer to the



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# Who Killed King Duncan?

question, 'Who killed King Duncan?' would be 'William Shakespeare': he wrote the play, he created all the characters in it, and he wrote the part where Macbeth killed King Duncan. It would not be correct to say that because Macbeth killed King Duncan, William Shakespeare did not kill him. Nor would it be correct to say that because William Shakespeare killed King Duncan, Macbeth did not kill him. Both are true. On the level of the characters in the play Macbeth fully (100 percent) caused King Duncan's death, but on the level of the creator of the play, William Shakespeare fully (100 percent) caused King Duncan's death. In similar fashion, we can understand that God fully causes things in one way (as Creator), and we fully cause things in another way (as creatures)."



# John Frame on “Who killed King Duncan?”

“I do disagree with Grudem on one point. He says that we could say that either Macbeth or Shakespeare ‘killed King Duncan.’ I agree, of course, that both Macbeth or Shakespeare are responsible, at different levels of reality, for the death of Duncan. But as I analyze the language that we typically use in such context, it seems clear to me that we would *not* normally say that Shakespeare killed Duncan. Shakespeare wrote the murder into his play. But the murder took place in the world of the play, not the real world of the author. Macbeth did it, not Shakespeare. We sense the rightness of the poetic justice brought against Macbeth for his crime. But we would certainly consider it very unjust if Shakespeare were tried and put to death for killing Duncan.”

# God Not To Be Blamed



“The phrase *author of evil* connotes not only causality of evil, but also blame for it. To ‘author’ evil is to do it. But in saying that God is related to the world as an author to a story, we actually provide a way of seeing that God is *not* to be blamed for the sin of his creatures.”

# Is God the Author of Sin?

**Westminster Confession of Faith (5.4):** “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extended itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, **neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.**”



# J.I. Packer on Providence

“What is God’s ultimate end in His dealings with His children? Is it simply their happiness, or is it something more? The Bible indicates that it is something more. It is *the glory of God Himself*....We see that He leaves us in a world of sin to be tried, tested, belabored by troubles that threaten to crush us – in order that we may glorify Him by our patience under suffering, and in order that He may display the riches of His grace and call forth new praises from us as He constantly upholds and delivers us....Is this a hard saying? Not to the man who has learned that his chief end in this world is to ‘glorify God, and (in so doing) to enjoy Him forever.’ To glorify God by patient endurance and to praise Him for His gracious deliverances: to live the whole of one’s life,



# J.I. Packer on Providence

through smooth and rough places alike, in sustained obedience and thanksgiving for mercy received – to seek and find one's deepest joy, not in spiritual lotus eating, but in discovering through each successive storm and conflict the mighty adequacy of Christ to save – and in the sure knowledge that God's way is best, both for our own welfare and for His glory: that is the heart of true religion. No problems of providence will shake the faith of the man who has truly learned this.”



# A.W. Tozier

“It would be well for us if we could learn early the futility of trying to obtain forbidden things by over-persuading God. He will not be thus stampeded. Anything that falls within the circle of His will He gives to whosoever asks aright, but not days or weeks of fasting and prayer will persuade Him to alter anything that has gone out of His mouth.”

# Joni Eareckson Tada: *When God Weeps*

“God’s plan is specific....He doesn’t believe in a hands-off policy of governing. He’s not our planet’s absent landlord. Rather, he screens the trials that come to each of us – allowing only those that accomplish his good plan, because he takes no joy in human agony. These trials aren’t evenly distributed from person to person. This can discourage us, for we are not privy to his reasons. But in God’s wisdom and love, every trial in a Christian’s life is ordained from eternity past, custom-made for that believer’s eternal good, even when it doesn’t seem like it.”

